The Chronicles Of Smethick

Prologue

An Inauspicious Beginning

Brian Smethick was a strange bloke, not actually insane but eccentric and capable of the most bizarre leaps of imagination. To begin with his eccentricities weren't noticeable, though that was probably due to the effect of rebelling against his parents. Namely a chubby man by the name of Barry who ran a company that made plastic parts to be used by other manufacturers in the production of toys and probably enjoyed his job a little too much, and a slim slightly posh gent called Logan that ran a small tailoring firm specializing in the production of fan costumes and again probably enjoyed his job a little too much.

Brian was sent to a religious school where one of the first things he was taught was that his parents were the work of satan and as a fairly ordinary kid unaware of the issues underlying this statement but fully acquainted with the hells of chores and being told off agreed with the school and as a result of this early proof that both he and the school were on the same wavelength, however wrong that would later turn out to be, Brian excelled at his classes and loved learning.

Years later as Brian prepared to go to secondary school he had an argument with his parents and believing in all that he had been taught, yelled back that he knew his parents were the work of satan as the school said so. His parents soon realized where they had been going wrong and sent Brian to the local state run secondary school and Brian left it an amorous social drinking atheist. The cold hard forbidden reality of life excited him in a strange way but also humbled him, he realized that there were those less fortunate than himself that did evil things but weren't in and of themselves evil.

He entered college aiming to be a Doctor, preferably a surgeon of some sort. As usual his work and commitment to it remained stunning and resolute but during his free time his flirtation with the darker side of life extended beyond a fumble in a bus shelter after 3 pints of Strongbow to a quick shag in the toilets after 3 litres of Smirnoff and a couple of doobies.

As college turned to university he began to take everything more seriously and oxymoronically treated it with more fun. His relationships with girls started to actually be relationships, although with experimentation. Doing drugs became as casual and fun as shots whilst alcohol became his virtual life blood and his clothing started to become more extravagant with each passing year until he was virtually wearing his own costume.

In the end though something had to give and despite his best efforts he didn't quite get the grades he wanted or needed to become a surgeon. After months looking for jobs he settled for a position at the local morgue and spent about a year trying in vain to find a better job before giving up and accepting that his life wouldn't get much better and the pay was ample enough for a mortgage and a bachelors lifestyle. There was still an itch though, a sense that something wasn't quite right, that he wasn't doing what he should be doing. He felt like his destiny lay elsewhere.

One night at a party, thrown by one of his ever extending group of friends, someone overdosed. Brian watched with pain, fear and rage as those at the party panicked and left the girl and her companion to suffer due to a fear of being caught and imprisoned. Brian watched all this and ran for he was not above the law. Some days later Brian was given a new corpse to examine and catalogue and saw with great sorrow and guilt that it was the girl from the party. Brian saw the evil performed by the unevil and remembered his old thoughts and oaths then saw what he must do. That day was a black day and the only reason he didn't give himself an overdose from the grief and guilt was that he had examined her and knew

that she did not die as a result of an overdose, she was a self harmer. Soon after Brian decided to become a Doctor to the underworld. He would be run a clinic and help those who, for whatever reason, don't want the authorities asking any awkward questions.

Brian's quiet little life was going strong for almost a decade and by the last year he was almost a teetotaler but something happened, something to shatter his Samaritan work stone dead. The first Brian knew of anything was when his estranged father Barry turned up in the morgue. The one piece of salvation was that he'd been assigned to Brian's colleague Stephen but nevertheless it was a shock and Brian would not have believed the cause of death if he hadn't experience of his colleague's superior skill. His dad Barry had died of a heart attack caused by choking on a pork pie.

Brian attended the small funeral and tried to comfort Logan, who was distraught. After weeping through the ceremony Logan confided in Brian that in recent years sales at the factory had been very poor and Barry had remortgaged the house to keep the business afloat but with him gone the house and the business were sure to go. Brian tried to help by offering to pay contributions towards the upkeep of the house and despite Logan's protestations he did just that. His business was now so strong that even with the meager profit margin there was more than enough to pay for two people to live in two different houses. It had even reached the stage that the local police, local hospital and local government unofficially and quietly supported the idea since crime and incidences of drug related injuries were down.

Five years later and Brian was now more like the manager of a charity than Robin Hood since, after having seen the casual acceptance of the practice by local authorities, previous reformed patients helped him out and this led to Brian getting more involved in his dad's former company in an attempt to turn his former throw of charity into a recoverable investment, and to his helping out with his dad's tailoring firm.

There was a problem with the plastics company though, sales were dropping and seemed like they would continue to drop for the foreseeable future as in the world of the internet and 4D TV a plastic doll was stone age and even Logan's costume tailors faced a decline since as they got more successful so there were less people needing to buy their garments, even with an ever increasing variety of characters to cosplay as.

Brian searched forum after forum and did research after research, searching for inspiration to solve either dilemma and the best he could come up with was that the slow in costume sales was likely down to Cosplayers becoming so obsessed as to the accuracy of the costume that they will only wear it if they are of a similar shape and size to the actors or actresses involved, thus limiting how many clothes they could buy.

As Brian struggled with his attempts to secure his parents businesses so he found his libido coming back to haunt him during special one to one sessions he ran for the practice. These sessions were usually general psychological and medical check ups that he performed with problem cases. The case he found he was at war with his libido over was that of Clare Dawson. She was an 18 year old bulimic anorexic that had been pregnant at 14 and Brian found himself looking at her with concern before drifting off a bit and picturing taking her clothes shopping, or her draped across the bonnet of some sports car, she was stunningly beautiful. He and she had established a nice open and honest rapport over a number of meetings so after he'd drifted off for a third time he explained that he was distracted by her beauty, hurriedly ended the meeting then retired home where he read a forum thread on Doctor Who costuming and a single sentence hit home 'Of course I'd love a full size companion to wear the clothes, scoff! scoff!'

That night an idea was forged in his sleep, an idea so bonkers and insane that from a certain perspective it might even be called evil but to him it seemed like the only logical option.

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Chapter 1

The Pitch

Brian woke the next day from a strange dream about the launch of some new product that promised to revolutionize both his fathers' businesses and remembered vividly getting stimulated by the idea. What the idea was he no longer knew. It didn't seem important so he thought no more about it or at least he tried not to but as he was brushing his teeth thoughts and images began to niggle away at him. As he moved from cleaning his teeth to having a shower these niggles grew to jigsaw puzzle pieces, striving to rearrange themselves into one cohesive whole.

Gradually, during his shower, pieces began to fall into place and he saw with ever greater clarity what action was needed, what bold step would secure the future he'd dreamt of. He finished his shower and stood panting before the steamed up bathroom mirror as his mind raced to place the last piece of the puzzle and secure his future. It was almost maddening that the secret to success was almost within his grasp but he couldn't quite see his way to grab hold of it. He was fortunate in that it wasn't long before the fog cleared and he was soon looking at himself in the mirror with incredulity. Brian tentatively touched then stroked his still warm cheek and ran from the bathroom in search of a phone.

6 hours later Brian strode into a posh London restaurant wearing a baggy brown overcoat over his usual Edwardian garb and addressed a six seater table with 4 occupants. Seated around the table in a clockwise fashion were Madison Cartwright, democratic chair-person of the union of underworld practitioners, Hugh Grotsby, a former crime overlord and patient of the underworld practice that now runs Barry's company at Brian's request, Alex Faraday, the managing director of the electronics firm which Barry's company often had dealings with, and Logan, Brian's dad and managing director of a popular costume tailoring company.

After introducing himself, and explaining that each party had been invited here as each had a vested interest in what he had to say, he produced a smallish rectangular gaudily decorated box which contained a 12 inch plastic doll and passed it to those at the table so they could examine it. This was what Barry's company currently produced. Next he produced another box which was similarly examined but this was half the size, pose-able and a reasonably accurate representation of a character from a TV series. This was what people brought. Finally Brian reached his hand into his pocket and pulled out a wooden spoon and placed it into the vase on the table and those seated laughed in anticipation of what they thought he might say next, something to do with going back to basics probably.

Brian wasn't laughing. He stood and cooled his nerve, eyes watching the crowds milling about him. Soon a waitress came over to ask him if he'd like to see the menu. Without even glancing in her direction he replied that there'd be no need as he'd be going to java soon. She said that she'd heard it was nice this time of year. He grunted that he'd like some carrot juice and the waitress went off to get it but took his coat as she went.

Brian sat down and explained that what was needed was a high end product that could satisfy numerous users with scales of cost and abilities. The new doll had to be based on real people, have the same pose-ability as in real people and be a perfected version of reality with anatomical accuracy in all areas. Pre-tax 15% of the products price went to whoever the doll was based on, 10% went to funding the underworld

practice charity, 25% was profit and 50% was the cost of making the dolls. As he explained this breakdown another waitress had arrived to take their orders and his guests were now truly intrigued as to what he was proposing.

It wasn't long before the waitresses arrived with their food and everyone was set to dig in when Brian coughed politely and introduced the young woman wearing his overcoat. She was Samantha Mildrew, a nude model frequently featuring in Lads mags and she was to be the new face of dolls. Hugh was rather miffed, just what was the point of getting a model for a 12 inch doll. It was then that Brian finally explained that he intended to make life size dolls that looked, felt and moved like the people they were based on. If he succeeded the possibilities were endless.

Brian was met with blank stares so he patted Samantha on the back who in turn removed the coat and passed it back to him. Hugh and Alex stared helplessly at the bikini clad wonder before their very eyes and pointed out that games consoles are highly lucrative and sell for hundreds of pounds, given the choice between a games console and a plasticlone of this woman he knew which he'd opt for. Slowly Hugh and Alex began nodding so Samantha took back the overcoat and over dinner the beginnings of a long term plan for development of the product took shape.

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Chapter 2

Plasticlones Are Go

It took five years but eventually Brian Smethick was standing with Alex, Madison, Logan, Patricia Farnham(1) and Peter Postlethwaite(2) at the launch of the new Plasticlone range of dolls. As the cameras flashed while reporters thronged to find out more about this strange idea and how it came about, the factories and distribution chains were hard at work trying to send the latest models out to shop floors.

At first glance the idea that someone like Brian Smethick had allowed his company to be still shipping out orders minutes before the doors were opened in shops all over the world seems like a hideous if understandable mistake. Surely they'd need days to be ready anywhere?

No. Brian was no fool, he knew about crowd and product launch dynamics. If a mass craze of hysteria is built up around a product and the flood gates are opened then there will be a scrum for products, even if such things are small enough to be easily passed off and taken away, let alone ones sold in packaging the size of coffins. As a result of this scrum supplies needed to be staggered, allow enough time for hysteria to die down a bit and the first purchases to be made and exit the building before the next wave of supply and demand hit.

This was not the only factor behind his decision though because he was not unaware that if there were stories of some stores being sold out (even those in areas where demand was likely to be smaller) then the news would be full of it, boosting sales and maintaining a wave of craze buying as concerned friends and family urgently tried to secure a gift for their loved ones at Christmas or birthdays. Brian knew this and that was why he had launched the product in June, so as to facilitate a second wind at Christmas.

There was another factor behind his launch strategy though. For the last two and a half years research had been dedicated to minimizing time between a person entering their offices and a plasticlone of themselves being brought at a store. Naturally during this operation, no plasticlones were actually sold but they tested the system using fridge freezers since they were of a similar size and weight.

What would happen was that someone like Sizanne Furvette3 would arrive at the offices of Barry's company and be stripped completely naked. While her clothes were sent off to be processed for usable measurements to enable Logan's store to create garments which could be ready by the time a product was handed to a customer she was placed in a scanning chamber.

She stood on a glass plate from which her weight was taken and her soles were scanned as a computer controlled camera and laser scanned her for the physical data. As a laser was used her eyes would be shut but that would not matter as on this run the computer was looking purely at her dimensions and measurements such as height, circumferences of fingers at various points etc. This physical data would be used to create the skeleton of the plasticlone.

Next a second camera scanned her again but this time it was creating a mat image of what she looked like from every angle under a certain light and applying it to data collected from the first scan so an accurate overall look could be created.

Finally she would leave the scanning room and a member of staff would implant air tubes into her nose and mouth before placing a bald cap on her and leading her to the mould making room where she would be immersed in a fast setting agent and left for a few seconds before being cut free and sent to clean off and recover.

The whole ordeal lasted two and a half minutes and most of that was walking to the mould centre. After another 30 seconds the plasticlone was strapped into her coffin packaging. After another 5 minutes the plasticlone arrived at the distribution centre and was switched for a fridge freezer, within an hour that fridge freezer was sold. By the time the freezer was sold, the real Sizanne was recovered enough to head home with a plasticlone copy of herself.

All of that meant Brian was perfectly happy to let the companies he assisted work away at making new plasticlones and continue adding them to the market as it was launched because that was one of the core strengths of the product range, anyone could turn up and pay to have a doll made of them and in return they would keep 15% of profits from any further sales of the doll.

There was something else though, something that Brian had implanted in the product from it's earliest beginnings, the potential for something brilliant and truly world changing, something that would change what it meant to be alive.

1 (The first official chair person of the newly officially declared charity 'Practitioners for the Protection, Redemption and Salvation of the Underworld' or the PPRSU though referenced anagrammatically as the Free Supper Institute by those so high minded that they see the charity as a bunch of misguided fools being exploited by thugs.)

2 (The whistle-blowing replacement for Hugh Grotsby who caught him sending top secret company information to the makers of Barbie.)

3 (Sizanne played Amelia Brockenhurst in the popular scifi series Neep Farg Nii Chiro and her costumes frequently sell for several thousands of pounds in Logan's shop due to bidding wars breaking out.)

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Chapter 3

The Fall

One month into the development of the plasticlone dolls and the two companies 'Auton farriers' and 'Industrial Geekism' had just finished the rough designs from which work could then be correctly assigned.

Brian held Alex back as the creative workshop ended then explained that he'd like a candid word. Alex listened amazed as Brian outlined his plan, here was the unofficial advisor asking to implant the seed of future potential into something as humble as a doll.

Brian explained that he wanted the joints to be wired up to motors and sensors that would allow the dolls to be remotely controlled intuitively from a Virtual Reality unit but more than that. He wanted the potential to be there for Artificial Intelligence programs, such as those in computer games, to be installed and take control of the doll.

At this Alex balked, even at the cutting edge Artificial Intelligence was an unreliable mess and to install it in a doll would be to cause unknowable amounts of damage. Brian countered that for the time being the dolls would act merely as receivers but with a hackable VR mode underneath. The data the dolls received would be archived for future use and from this resource, patterns could be found and programs formulated.

A year into the project and the plasticlone was almost at the prototype stage so Alex led Brian away to tell him he'd fulfilled his task and done as was requested of him. Brian was relieved to hear the news but added that on its own those measures might not be enough to achieve the ultimate goal and so requested that data be collected from himself and his wife so as to enable the recording of life and the ability to import that into the dolls.

Alex found this to be a comparatively small task seeing as all it really entailed was the implantation of small monitoring devices into the spine and joints which would wirelessly transmit records to the same archive as those of the plasticlones.

As the years went by and the plasticlones progressed Alex found he was able to harvest patterns found from Madison and Brian's respective archives to create simple programs for the dolls which would enable them to be better used. The dolls could get up, sit down, lie down, stand up, stand, walk, run and put on clothes. Such a skill set was considerably desirable and practical in a life size doll so that was soon touted as a USP.

So to the launch and more importantly the in-rush of data from around the world. The system crashed a few times due to over popularity but these issues were soon overcome and it wasn't long before geeks started to find the hackable VR mode. By the time Christmas rolled around, there were online support net works and distributions of Linux being dedicated to work with it. 5 years after this, hackers found out about the archives, another year later and the story broke as official world wide news. 5 years after this and AI improved dramatically, followed 5 years later by the vast improvement and reliability of VR suites, things continued ever onward in this fashion as technology and sales drove investment in technology.

Ten years later Logan died when the plasticlone he was using as a dress makers dummy was hacked into and strangled him.

Twenty years later Brian Smethick and Madison Smethick had a party with far too much drugs and alcohol that wound up with Madison dead and Brian sobbing.

Two years later and the owners/runners of Brian's dad's respective companies are forced to sack him from his voluntary position of advisory and distance themselves from him. Brian spent eight years in jail as opposed to the usual twenty as a result of all charity work he has done and his genuinely feeling remorseful about events. After leaving jail Brian booked himself into a hospital/rehabilitation -centre/holiday camp for five years.

Three years later Brian died of a heart attack after spending the last years of his life buying a mansion and real estate on Mars as well as clearing his name somewhat by appearing on TV and counselling against using drugs.

Alex visited Brian weeks before he died and Brian confessed something terrible to him. What had happened to Madison wasn't some drug fueled mistake, he'd quite deliberately murdered her but it wasn't what he wanted, not really. Madison told him that night that she had cancer. She'd been managing it for some time and usually it wasn't that big a deal but recently things had taken a turn for the worse and she had weeks to live, if that. As a result of all the medication she'd been taking, it wouldn't be swift and painless, it would be lingering and painful. Her body had been fighting the good fight for so long that it wouldn't give up all in one go, instead the cancer would take her over bit by tiny bit, allowing her to be alive as she died.

Brian had swiftly sobered up upon hearing the news and was utterly taken aback. Madison casually continued, saying that she'd stopped the drugs to avoid an agonising month or more of dying and to avoid Brian from being landed with a bed ridden corpse of a wife when he'd no doubt rather be out pulling.

Brian desperately tried to talk her out of stopping the medication, sought to help and comfort her in some way, but she explained that it was pointless and besides she didn't really want to die an old woman as it was galling enough now to see herself at her prime being walked half naked through the streets by gangs of streetmapping geeks.

Brian explained carefully to Alex, as he had once explained desperately to Madison, that he had it set so their memories were logged and their bodies existed in the records so new copies could be made with their minds and personalities, they could live again as plasticlones.

Alex frowned upon hearing this news. He could see what was coming next but he let Brian finish explaining. Madison had heard Brian's explanation and seemed positively cheered up by it but not in the way that he would have liked, for Madison now asked that they commit suicide together, just each take an overdose amidst one last night of passion and wake up as plasticlones. Brian had agreed and the two lovers kissed and entwined themselves then, as Madison playfully placed a lethal amount of pills into his mouth, he picked up a steak knife and stabbed her in the back.

Brian passed the pills into her mouth as they snogged their last and removed the knife. She lay bleeding on the floor as he explained that he needed time to plan and prepare.

Alex heard all this then Brian handed him a usb 6.0 thirty petabyte hard drive. Instinctively Alex knew what it meant and was about to leave when he thought better of it and enquired as to why he hadn't mentioned any of this in court. Brian explained that it all rather depended on the definition of life. Was a

plasticlone with the same memories really just a continuation of human uniqueness? Probably not. It was better than nothing, had to be, but no substitute for simply staying alive. The guilt at killing his love was what drove him to make up the drug story, he couldn't bear to perform such an act without being punished. With that cleared up, Alex left.

On the last day of Brian's life, he got up at 6:00, had a shower, drank a cup of tea and enjoyed some toast then he began writing a letter. The letter was to himself, his plasticlone self yet to come, it was very nearly a suicide note.

Brian was finished by half 10 and soon posted it then he strode out to the local spaceport in his dressing gown and caught a flight to Mars. By half 12 Brian was standing outside his estate. He found a garden within, marked out by a nearby tree. He planted a small plaque saying (Brian Smethick karked it here) then he grabbed a shovel and began digging his grave. He was finished by half one and decided to have a pork pie for lunch. He died at 13:35 in his own grave, as he choked he rasped 'I only did the best I cou...!'

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Chapter 4

Alex Faraday woke up with the knowledge that Brian Smethick was dead. He didn't know how he knew or why he knew but he felt in the core of his being that the great man had died. Sure enough the news was declared that the great man had been found dead in his own grave on Mars and Alex saw with startling clarity that it was time, he had to boot up the external hard drive.

Weeks of work passed before Alex had finished all that had been asked of him on the hard drive but he hardly cared for the man had been truly great and if he was right then the nature of sapient existence was to be shaken to its very core and science was about to take one bold leap into the future.

At last though, Alex was ready. He booted up the consolidated archive of Brian Smethick and loaded it into the modified plasticlone that stood before him and activated the switch-on procedure. Sparks flared and pipes rattled as a bodged together switch-on device activated all the separate components required to bring life to the new plasticlone in sequence. Alex stared silently at the plasticlone with a mixture of hope and fear on his face, he felt like Frankenstein. Quietly though he was praying to a god he didn't believe in and crossing all his fingers.

'Ould!' squealed the plasticlone. 'Oh that's odd! My voice sounds different, which means...' The plasticlone trailed off, opened its eyes, spotted Alex and the two screamed almost simultaneously. 'It worked!'

After two minutes of laughing then crying about the achievement, Brian asked to be let go. Alex had secured the plasticlone to the wall using titanium locks earlier in case Brian or the plasticlone turned out to be evil.

Twenty minutes later the resurrected Brian strode tentatively forwards in his new body. He shook his wrists then raised his arms to the horizontal before watching them fall as he examined the feel and weight of these new arms. They were his arms, they did the same things in much the same way but they were indefinably different.

Alex watched this with mounting terror at what he had achieved but continued to play his part as he led Brian through the company laboratory to a full length mirror.

Brian strode more confidently ahead to examine himself in the mirror and appreciated what he saw. He had cheated somewhat with his new body as his wife had been in her early twenties when she was first scanned but he had been in his mid forties and thought that given the chance to change and undo those extra years, he'd be foolish to pass it up. More importantly though, he felt his wife deserved a younger model to suit herself.

Designing his new body had taken up a lot of those years post plasticlone doll launch and had entailed taking lots of photographs of fit young men, creating moodboards and deciding what features both made a man look younger and more attractive whilst also exuding an ancient wisdom and personality that suited his own.

He hadn't mucked around with the face, that was still him, clearly recognizably him. He'd cleaned up the image a bit, removed a few freckles and areas of scarring or scabbing but in general the only thing different was the lack of wrinkles.

Not that removing wrinkles was permanent mind, every plasticlone aged at the rate of 1 second per-second as the plastic and components slowly degraded over time to the point that 100 years later all functioning would cease and the plasticlone would die.

Even as he looked upon a new lease of life, his human sense of mortality took hold again, albeit leavened by the knowledge that such a memory transfer procedure could be performed again.

At last Brian turned around and stared Alex, his divine resurrector, in the eyes and said. “Thank you, you saved my life, my future.”

Alex said coldly. “Brian Smethick's dead. I went to his funeral. I saw his body buried on Mars. All you are is a prototype plasticlone with the same memories. You think you're him but you're not. You're just a doll he designed so his work might continue and he might die happy in the knowledge that another version of him and his wife live happily ever after.”

Brian wrinkled his nose and said. “A bit harsh but true! I know I'm not actually him, he knew that too, but I am all that's left of him so for all intents and purposes I am he! Anyway did you do what I, he, asked?”

“Yes.” yawned Alex. “You're run by a microbial fuel cell and there's an inbuilt body-clock which gives you 4-8 hours sleep each night while a synthetic rat brain wired up to a microcomputer loaded with the latest AI software gives you a mind and emotion. Everything else has been achieved, clothes are behind the wardrobe and your precious wife is waiting to be booted up at any minute. Now, please, just go before I regret ever pandering to Brian's requests!”

Brian did not have to be told twice. He grabbed his clothes and changed into them as he left the building. He soon strode along the pavement as he used the iPhone ensconced in the right pocket of his coat to hail a mini cab. Once in the cab and headed towards his destination, he rooted around in his pocket for two tickets, kissed them and called someone on his iPhone. Brian said that the rumors of his death had been exaggerated and the funeral more symbolic than final then he hung up and played Angry Birds for a bit, easily beating his highest score.

The cab pulled up outside a strange house that appeared to be designed in the Georgian style and yet was made from futuristic versions of metal and glass. A tall leggy red head stepped out of the house and approached the car. Brian sighed silently at her beauty then opened the door to let her in. She was Ace

Druggosa, most famous for playing the companion to latest incarnation of the Chronomonk known as the Gardener. Ace was also Brian's best friend and mistress, despite the levels of effort he had put in for his true love, he was still a man and he had needs. Ace provided these for him and in return Brian used his connections to ensure fans didn't overstep the mark.

As the cab journeyed onwards Brian decided to tell her everything. Why he looked so different, why he had killed his wife and why he had gotten her to agree to be implanted with sensors. By the time the cab arrived at the final destination1, Ace was overwhelmed, she didn't know what to think. Luckily she didn't have to as soon she was signing autographs before making her way backstage while Brian entered the main hall and caught up with some of his old friends.

The convention lasted for a whole weekend, during which Brian and Ace had some simply fantastic sex and Ace exclusively announced the launch of a new range of plasticlones that could think.

After the convention was over and before filming the next series of Gardener Howl, Ace decided to take Brian clothes shopping for a whole new look, still based around flamboyant suits but a new look nonetheless. It was as Brian was trawling these shops, seeing all the young women with their arses on show, that an idea struck him.

What if plasticlones were bar coded? A tattoo across the right buttock cheek say? That could be scanned using the camera on a smart phone and instantly show statistics, specifications and cost information about the product and allow the casual browser to purchase then there and then? Dating sites could use a similar system for real people with the option to ask out replacing the option to buy. Young women who tired of being perpetually hit on could pay to be added to the product range and have a tattoo displaying a link to where a plasticlone of themselves could be brought.

Thinking deeper Brian realized that subscribers to this app could pay extra to chop and change specifications. See a looker in the street with a kind heart that isn't in to you or your sex then you simply change the set up when you order. That girl a touch too tall or small? That bloke has the wrong colour eyes and too much of a beer gut? See a lovely couple in the street that you'd fancy a threesome with? Order them online and set your specifications.

At lunch, having picked out Brian's new wardrobe, Brian told Ace of his new idea and she was thrilled by it and the two resolved to find Alex, resurrect Brian's wife then get Plasticlone Limited, as Brian's dad's company was now called, to accept his idea and give him a cut of it.

They entered the lab and heard sobbing and ran to find where it was coming from. They didn't notice Alex hiding behind the door, holding a gun and a remote control. Alex shut off the recording which Ace had just found playing from a computer and confronted the two lovebirds.

Brian called out alarmed. "Now, don't do anything stupid, Alex!"

Alex cried. "Bit fucking late for that!"

He aimed the gun squarely between Brian's eyes before adding he added. "We didn't learn the lesson of Gardener Howl did we!? Never let machines gain mobile intelligence! They'll take over the world! Already they outnumber us! We humans serve a race of inane robotic dolls! That is NOT right!"

Brian retorted. "Exactly, it's not! People often have more than one doll, just as they have more than one

pet or farm animal."

Alex sighed. "Perhaps you're right? Perhaps it's all perfectly normal and above board. Either way I can't cope. The world is changing and will change further, the very definition of life itself is about to be questioned when you launch that product on the market. I can't be to blame for that. I have to stop you."

His finger tightened on the trigger finger and Brian desperately cried out. "You can only kill one of us!"

Alex turned the gun on himself and Brian caught his body before saying a mournful apologetic prayer from his earliest life then he called the police.

Weeks later the investigation was over, Brian's revival and the story behind it had become world news causing the companies he used to associate with to come running back to him and the products and services he'd worked out were either on sale or in development. Brian and Ace broke off their affair and agreed never to speak of it again though Brian did buy a sentient plasticlone of her to keep for a rainy day and complete his collection.

Finally though, it was time, Brian Smethick brought Madison Smethick back to life and when she realised it had worked, they hugged for hours without needing to say a thing.

1 The destination was Utopia 2133, a Gardener Howl convention, Ace was dressed as her character while Brian wore a perfect darker Seventh Gardener costume, complete with Garden Fork.